

CMC デイスクースにおける
ミスコミュニケーションの原因としての省略記号

Ellipsis in E-discourse as a Source of Miscommunication

李 イニッド
Waiching Enid Mok

要旨

CMC (コンピューターを媒介としたコミュニケーション) デイスコースに関する先行研究では、省略記号(ellipsis)は複数の発語内効力とコミュニケーション機能を持つことが可能であることが示されている。本研究では、受信者の観点から、一見シンプルに見える省略記号は実に複雑で曖昧な非言語的キューであり、誤解を引き起こす要因になる可能性があることを指摘したい。調査に使用されたデータは、同僚間で交換された電子メール及び省略記号の解読に関するアンケートの回答から抽出したものである。分析の結果、以下の点が明らかになった。(1)電子メールにおける省略記号は、ほかのメディアにおけるものと異なって、発話の中間または発話末に見られるが、発話の冒頭でまたは単独で使われることはない。(2)省略記号は発信者の意図的沈黙を示す以外には、文脈によって与えられる意味が異なるため、多くの機能を果たすことができる。(3)省略記号の使用目的は消極的ポライトネスも積極的ポライトネスも伝えることができ、「自己志向」(イントラパーソナル)と「他者志向」(インターパーソナル)の二重性がある。しかし、省略記号の解釈は受信者によって大きく異なることがある。

Abstract

Previous research has shown that the ellipsis mark in electronic discourse can realize multiple illocutionary forces and communicative functions. Despite its usefulness, this study demonstrates from a recipient's point of view that the ellipsis mark is a deceptively simple-looking but complex, vague nonverbal cue that can constitute a major source of miscommunication. The data used for the study were drawn from a corpus of Japanese e-mail messages exchanged between coworkers and responses provided by L1 informants (n=35) to a questionnaire about the meaning-making of ellipsis in different utterances. It was found that the ellipsis mark occurs in utterance-medial or utterance-final position but never in utterance-initial position or independently as an isolated entity. Apart from indicating an intentional silence, ellipsis can perform many other functions by taking on different meanings depending on the context in which it appears. Ellipsis may be used to convey negative politeness or positive politeness for self-oriented and/or other-oriented purposes. Nevertheless, interpretation of ellipsis can vary considerably from one recipient to another.

Keywords : ellipsis, computer-mediated communication, miscommunication

1. Introduction

Ellipsis, also known as “ellipsis mark,” “ellipsis dots,” “suspension dots/points,” “repeated full stops,” “the dots,” or simply “dot, dot, dot” is one of the nonlexical devices that is gaining widespread popularity in computer-mediated communication, both

synchronous and asynchronous (Maness, 2007; Ong, 2011; Simpson 2005). This includes text-messaging, instant messages, e-mails, and chat rooms, such as LINE, WhatsApp, WeChat, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Weibo, LinkedIn, and Facebook Messenger. Researchers who are interested in the language practices on the Internet and electronic interactions in general have shown that computer-mediated communication has given rise to a new variety of discourse generally known as computer-mediated discourse (CMD) or electronic discourse (“e-discourse” for short). This new variety of discourse is characterized as “semi-speech,” which is neither spoken nor written but something that stands in between, with its specific lexical features and graphology including emoticons and punctuation (AbuSa’aleek, 2015). David Crystal (2004, 2008) coined the terms “Netspeak” and “Textspeak” to refer to this type of new language which he considers “the latest manifestation of the human ability—and young human ability, at that—to be linguistically creative and to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings” (2008, p.82).

Unlike conventional usage in traditional formal writing, ellipsis in e-discourse is sometimes used in unique ways to suit different purposes and audiences. Even though it seems highly likely that all languages do have ellipsis, albeit in slightly different forms, its pragmatic significance has generally been somewhat downplayed, if not totally overlooked. In this paper, I present evidence from Japanese data that ellipsis, though simple-looking and easy to encode, is in fact a rather complex cue in online interactions—one that is not always easy to decode accurately and thus can very easily become a trigger for miscommunication. Miscommunication is used here as an umbrella term covering various types of communication failures, including “misunderstanding,” “non-understanding,” “communication breakdown,” “discomfort in communication,” “misconception,” “wrong reference identification,” and “misperception.” Roughly speaking, it refers to situations in which the recipient fails to understand the message in the way it was intended by the sender (Ryan & Barnard, 2009, p.45).

2. Ellipsis: Formal Characteristics and Interactive Functions

To begin with, let us consider the formal characteristics of ellipsis. The most common form of ellipsis is an unspaced sequence of three round dots (periods or full stops), with or without a space on either side, or a precomposed three-dot glyph (“…” or “⋯”). As shown in Table 1, variant forms of ellipsis may differ slightly in shape, length, or the width of space in between. The ellipsis mark may comprise somewhere between two and six round (sometimes square) dots or more, or a series of small circles “○○○○” in texts written in languages such as Chinese or Japanese where a period is written as a small circle known as *juhao* in Chinese or *kuten/maru* in Japanese. The small circles may sometimes be

replaced by the interpunct “...” (*nakaguro* in Japanese) or the enumeration comma “、、、” (*touten* in Japanese or *duanhao* in Chinese, which literally means ‘pause mark’), or a combination of both, such as “、、、。”.

Another distinctive characteristic of ellipsis is that it has no clear semantic content or grammatical relationship with any word of the utterance in which it occurs. In other words, the ellipsis mark is by nature a “vague” linguistic unit (cf. the notion of “vague/elastic language” by Sabet and Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2019). When the ellipsis mark is embedded in a text, sometimes it is difficult to find or notice. If you do not look closely enough, you can easily miss it. Or even if you see one, you may mistake it for a typographical error or think it is unimportant. In either case, you end up ignoring it because it does not seem to affect your understanding of the utterance as a whole. This is how ellipsis is usually treated—just a tiny little something with or without which does not seem to matter.

Table 1. Various forms of ellipsis

	..		
	oo	、、
...	ooo	、、、
.	oooo	、、。
.	ooooo	、、、。

In traditional written genres, ellipsis is often used to indicate the absence of words, an omission of a piece of information, or a “linguistic gap,” as it is sometimes called (e.g., Wilson, 2000). In such cases, it is equivalent to expressions such as “etc.” and “and so on and so forth.” Ellipsis can also represent an interruption or a silent pause in speech. Researchers have shown that the use of ellipsis in CMD has departed from conventional usage in that it can perform several other functions such as floor management (e.g., turn-holding or turn-elicitation, particularly in chat rooms), hedging, mitigation, and signaling disagreement, hesitation, surprise, or topic changes (Crystal, 2016; Darics, 2012; Fagan and Desai, 2003).

Ellipsis in conversations takes a completely different form than that in e-discourse by being “empty,” i.e., soundless. However, given the interactive conversational nature of communication via online social media, we have reason to believe that there ought to be some degree of parallelism between ellipsis in conversations and ellipsis in e-discourse. It is

thus worth noting that one of the major functions of ellipsis in Japanese conversational styles, as Yohena (2003, p.87) points out, is “creation of rapport and involvement.” This is because the use of ellipsis in conversations among Japanese presupposes that “the speaker assumes that the hearer can fill in from linguistic and/or extra-linguistic contexts” (p.80). While it may sound a bit far-fetched to people in so-called “low-context” cultures (Hall, 1976) where people are more individualized and less involved with one another, ellipsis represents a widely accepted way of indirect communication which is based on two deep-rooted values in Japanese culture, namely, the pursuit of *wa* (social harmony) and the virtue of *sasshi* (emphatic guesswork). As will be shown later, the desire to build rapport and involvement is also an important motivating factor for using ellipsis in Japanese e-mail correspondence.

3. Purpose and Data Collection

The aim of this study is to add to the current literature and shed some light on our understanding of the pitfalls of overusing ellipsis in e-discourse. Drawing on research data in a Japanese context, I show that although the ellipsis mark is not usually considered to be something in any way comparable to a content word in terms of the information load it carries, it can play a vital role in most types of writing by providing a convenient alternative to words. This is because ellipsis can take on different meanings in different contexts to meet different needs and purposes which may be intrapersonal (i.e., self-oriented), interpersonal (i.e., other-oriented), or both. It is also important to note that because of its inherent vagueness, ambiguity, and polysemy, the ellipsis mark can become a source of potential miscommunication.

The study is based on two sets of data. The first dataset comprises 102 Japanese e-mail messages gathered from several sources. The second dataset consists of answers to a questionnaire concerning the meaning-making of ellipsis in thirty different utterances. The only criterion in the selection of the e-mails was that each of them must contain at least one ellipsis occurrence. All the messages were written by L1 users of Japanese and exchanged among members of the faculty and administrative staff of a Japanese university. Most of the recipients, but not all, were L1 users of Japanese. Excerpts from thirty e-mails randomly chosen from the first dataset were used to create a questionnaire to be given to a group of informants (n=35). For each excerpt, the informants were asked to do three things: (1) to guess the sender’s intended meaning(s) through the use of ellipsis, (2) to replace the ellipsis with words, or to “paraphrase,” so to speak, and (3) to identify the kind of speech act involved in the excerpt, e.g., thanking, making a request, apologizing, complaining. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect information on possible

inferences, speculations and judgements about the illocutionary forces and communicative functions of the ellipsis occurrences. The informants were all L1 users of Japanese who were not among the original intended recipients of the e-mails included in the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

A total of 381 ellipsis occurrences were observed in the e-mail data used for this study. Figure 1 shows that 44% of the e-mails were addressed to multiple recipients while 56% were addressed to single recipients. This suggests that the use of ellipsis is not limited to interactions between two individuals but is also quite common between individuals and groups.

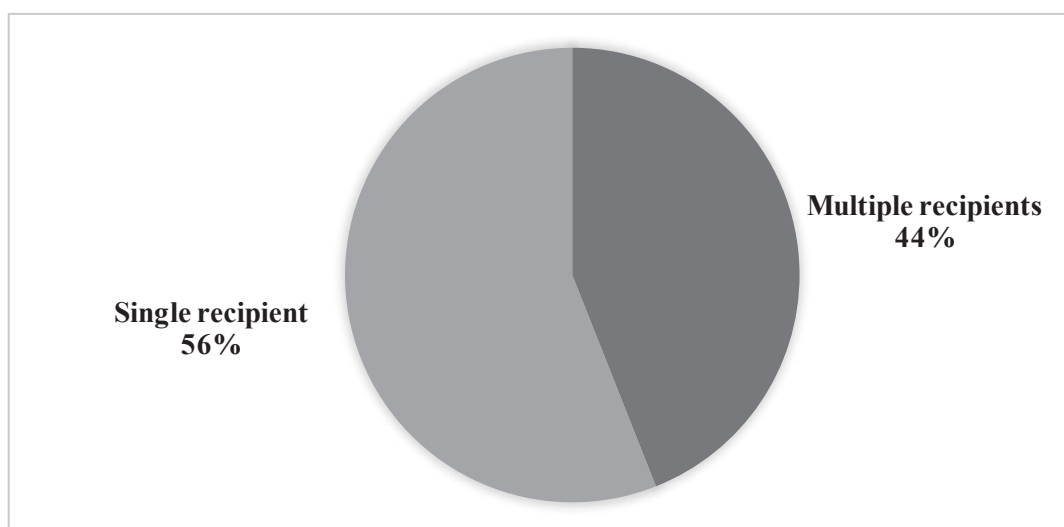


Figure 1. Percentages of e-mails addressed to single versus multiple recipients.

As Figure 2 illustrates, the number of ellipsis occurrences within a message ranges from one to thirty-two, with an average of 3.7 occurrences per message, suggesting that not only is the use of ellipsis in work-related e-mail correspondence legitimate, it is gaining currency. Although most of the messages contain only one or two occurrences, there seems to be no limit to how many times it can appear within a message. However, some senders may feel more comfortable than others using ellipsis in work-related messages and some may have a stronger tendency to do so with certain recipients or when they are writing about certain topics. This in turn suggests that the use of ellipsis as a communicative cue in e-discourse is not only context-sensitive but also very much a matter of personal style.

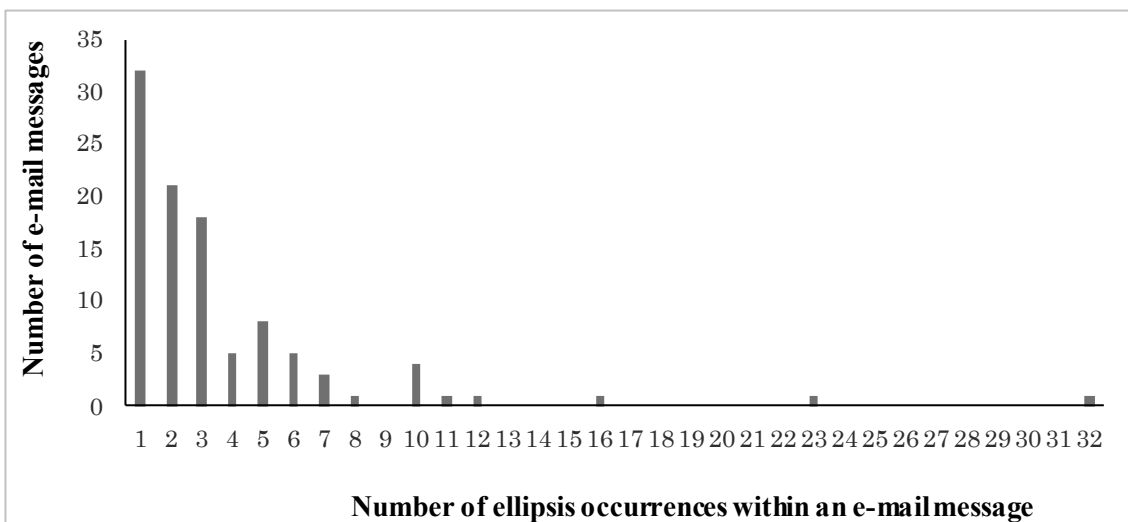


Figure 2. Frequency of ellipsis occurrences.

Figure 3 indicates that 67.7% of the ellipsis occurrences appear in utterance-medial position and 32.3% are found in utterance-final position, or at the end of a sentence. Although it is rather common to see the ellipsis mark occurring in the utterance-initial position or standing on its own as an utterance in other types of computer-mediated communication, both synchronous and asynchronous, there is not a single instance of ellipsis occupying the initial position or appearing independently in the collected data. This is likely to be related to the fact that there is usually a longer interval between posting an e-mail and receiving a response, which makes communication through e-mail less immediate and less like conversations in real-life social situations. Interestingly, even though the ellipsis occurrences in this study are limited to only utterance-medial and utterance-final positions, they do not seem to be governed by any syntactic rule. In other words, the ellipsis can either precede or follow almost any syntactic unit.

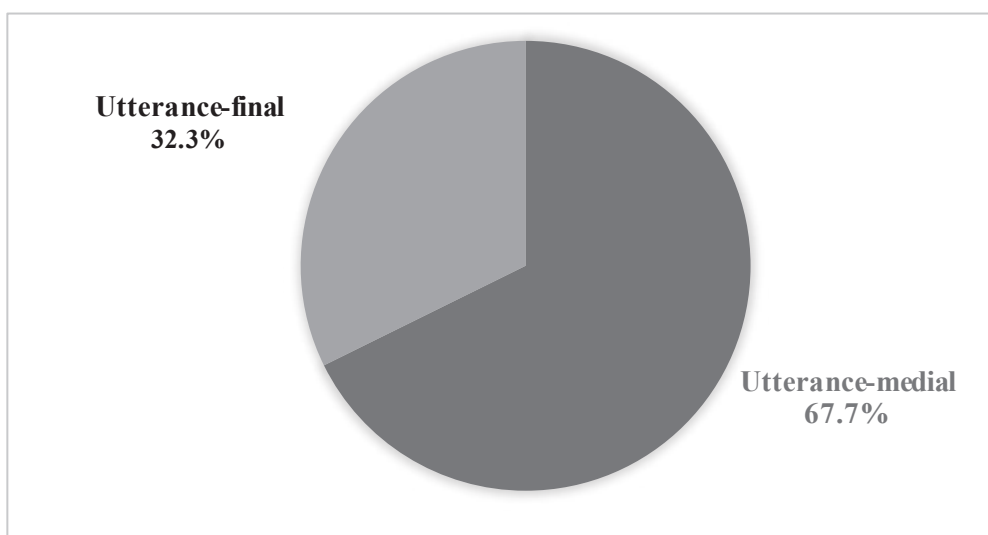


Figure 3. Percentages of ellipses in utterance-medial versus utterance-final positions.

On the pragmatic level, the ellipsis occurrences are found in utterances associated with a wide variety of speech acts, such as apologizing, thanking, complimenting, complaining, requesting, protesting, disagreeing, inviting, refusing, and giving negative feedback. Analysis of the data suggests that ellipsis is a nonlexical, nonverbal cue that can convey negative and/or positive politeness and serve a wide range of functions and purposes, which maybe self-oriented and/or other-oriented, by fulfilling one or more of the following purposes:

- A. To imply omissions, i.e., that some words have deliberately been excluded or unsaid.
- B. To encourage the recipient to anticipate or predict what is coming next.
- C. To represent a dramatic pause at a crucial moment where important information is being withheld or comes to light.
- D. To signal voice modulation, i.e., changing your speed and volume; making a pause, slowing down, softening your tone, talking loud to emphasize a certain point, or to tell your recipients that you want them to pay special attention to what is coming next in the utterance.
- E. To enhance the effect of whatever you are trying to convey to the recipient.
- F. To create resonance with the recipient, to build rapport, or simply to achieve phatic communion.

Below are some examples of these purposes. The dots are kept intact in the English translation. In cases where the dots appear in utterance-final position, the number of dots

used by the sender remain the same. That is, no additional dot is given as a punctuation mark to indicate the end of the sentence or utterance. *A-F indicates possible purposes.

Example (1). *D, E

ちょっと意味がわからなくて・・・本当にすみません。教えてください。

Chotto imi ga wakaranaku-te・・・Honto-ni sumimasen. Oshiete-kudasai.

'I don't know what it means・・・I'm really sorry (to bother you) but can you tell me?'

Example (2). *E, F

12月になりましたね。あと少し・・・頑張っていきましょう。

Juni-gatsu-ni narimashita-ne. Ato sukoshi・・・Ganbatte-ikimasho.

'It's December already, isn't it? It's [=The year is] almost over・・・Let's hang in there.'

Example (3). *A, D

それでは、今週も素敵な毎日で・・・

Soredewa, konshuu mo suteki-na mainichi de・・・

'Well, have a nice week ahead・・・'

Example (4). *A, D, F

これって？ 何ですか？ 全く分からなくて・・・もし、何か知っていたら、教えてください。

Kore-tte? Nan desu-ka? Mattaku wakara-naku-te・・・Moshi nani-ka shittei-tara oshiete-kudasai.

'This? What is it? I don't understand it at all・・・If you know anything about that, please let me know.'

Example (5). *D, E

力になれず・・・ごめんなさいね。

Chikara-ni narezu・・・gomen-nasai-ne.

I can't be of any help・・・Sorry.

Example (6). *A, D, F

内容、確認いたしました。ばっちりだと思います。(私の視点からは・・・)

Naiyou, kakunin-itashimashi-ta. Bacchiri-da-to omoi-masu. (watashi-no shiten kara-wa・・・)

'I've checked the content. Looks perfect to me, (From my point of view・・・)'

Example (7). *F

いろいろあって・・・こちらこそ お疲れ様です。

Iroiro a-tte・・・kochira koso otsukaresama-desu.

‘[I understand] you’ve been busy・・・Thank you [for your hard work].’

Example (8). *A, B, C, D

最後の部分にちょっと・・・ひとことほしいな～？？？という感じがですが。

Saigo-no bubun-ni chotto・・・Hitokoto hoshii-na～？？？-to-iu kanji desu-ga.

‘In the last part, it seems that・・・if we could add just a few more words, it might sound better.’

Example (9). *D, E

勝手ですが・・・ご理解ください。

Katte desu-ga・・・go-rikai kudasai.

‘I’m sorry for being selfish・・・Thank you for your understanding.’

Example (10). *A, B, D

メールを見てびっくりしました。もう・・・いったいどうなっているのでしょうか？

Meeru-wo mite bikkuri-shimashi-ta. Mou・・・ittai dou natte-iru-n desho-ka?

‘I saw the e-mail. Ugh!・・・What in the world is going on?’

Let us take a closer look at Example (5). There is only one occurrence of ellipsis in the utterance. As recipients, we might want to know: Is this an apology? (It certainly looks like one.) Could it be something else too? (Probably.) How about an expression of regret? Or a refusal? A refusal to what? (To a request for help, perhaps?) Could it be also an expression of self-blame, anger, or reflection? and so on and so forth. In fact, all these questions are derivable from the questionnaire informants’ responses. This means there are many ways to interpret the ellipsis in this specific utterance or context. Here are some examples of the informants’ responses:

- (i) silence to represent a slight apology, or a sincere apology
- (ii) an unfilled pause to indicate that the sender is thinking or searching for words
- (iii) a hesitation marker before saying no to a request for help
- (iv) a device of emphasis to make the sender sound more apologetic
- (v) a sign of courtesy to show consideration for the recipient(s) or to impress them
- (vi) a signal of trailing-off of thought or self-reflection
- (vii) an omission of words that are better left unsaid

- (viii) a nonverbal cue (that represents e.g., speechlessness, a sigh, weeping) to indicate regret/self-blame/anger or to arouse sympathy from the recipient(s)
- (ix) a paralinguistic cue (that represents e.g., reduced speech rate, stronger stress) to convey the sender's true feelings

Of these nine possible interpretations, (i) and (ii) are the most common. Only (ii) and (vi) are considered intrapersonal or self-oriented whereas the rest are all interpersonal or other-oriented.

In addition, the informants were asked to provide paraphrases of all the ellipses in the questionnaire. The purpose was to elicit information from the recipient's point of view for further analysis. The paraphrases represent inferences and speculations made by the informants regarding the senders' intentions, thus providing useful data that would widen our perspective to include more possibilities in interpreting the illocutionary forces of ellipsis. For example, if the informants interpreted an ellipsis as an omission of words, analyzing the paraphrases helps us understand what they thought was being deliberately left out by the senders. Alternatively, if they interpreted it as silence or a hesitation, the paraphrases would inform us about what the silence or hesitation might have meant.

Some examples of the collected paraphrases for the ellipsis in Example (5) are given below. The Japanese fillers in (i)-(k) can be roughly translated into English as 'um,' 'uh,' 'you know,' or 'well.'

- (a) 本当に！ (*Honto-ni!* 'Really!')
- (b) 本当に (*Honto-ni* 'Really!')
- (c) 力になれずにごめんね (*Chikara ni narezu gomen-ne* 'Sorry I can't be of any help.')
- (d) 力になれずに本当に (*Chikara ni narezu honto-ni* 'Sorry I can't be of any help.')
- (e) 何と言ったらいいのか (*Nan to ittara ii-noka* 'What should I say?')
- (f) 私も何とかしてあげたいけど (*Watashi mo nan-toka shite-age-tai kedo* 'I wish I could help.')
- (g) 悔しいです (*Kuyashii desu* 'I'm full of regret.')
- (h) 自分の力不足で (*Jibun no chikara-busoku de* 'I'm afraid I can't help.')
- (i) なんか (*Nanka* Japanese filler)
- (j) あのー (*Anoo* Japanese filler)
- (k) えーっと (*Etto* Japanese filler)

5. Concluding remarks

In summary, the major findings of the present study include: First, the diversity of the responses to the questionnaire suggests that the ellipsis mark can indeed be interpreted in many different ways but it is not easy to tell whether some are more correct than others. Second, some of the interpretations may contradict each other (e.g., a slight apology vs. a full, sincere apology), which in turn may lead the recipient(s) to go in opposite directions and form very different opinions about the sender. Third, ellipsis may be used to convey a verbal or nonverbal message and it may or may not be replaceable with words. Fourth, given the vagueness, ambiguity and polysemy of ellipsis, its meaning and function could easily be misdecoded or overlooked.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that despite its multifunctionality, the use of ellipsis in e-mail correspondence may increase the risk of misinterpretation and thus hinder rather than facilitate communication. This means although the ellipsis mark is seemingly unimportant and irrelevant to understanding the main ideas of a message, it can be a major source of miscommunication in some places. To borrow a term from Michael Agar (1996), author of the highly cited book *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*, ellipsis occurrences constitute potential “rich points,” which are defined by the author as “points where communication goes wrong” or “when, suddenly, you don’t know what’s going on” (p. 106). This is precisely what happens when you cannot figure out what an ellipsis is supposed to mean in a particular context and feel stuck or lost in the middle of a communicative act because of its occurrence(s). It is also worth mentioning that overuse of the ellipsis may be regarded as a sign of a lack of communication skills, or a speech dysfluency, so to speak. So here’s word of caution: Don’t underestimate the power of these tiny little dots and beware of their potential risks.

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